

## Civil Rights Movement: An Overview

A look at the largest social movement of the 20th century, including the Brown decision, the challenge to social segregation, voting rights, black power, and the movements legacy

The civil rights movement can be defined as a mass popular movement to secure for African Americans equal access to and opportunities for the basic privileges and rights of U.S. citizenship. Although the roots of the civil rights movement go back to the 19th century, the movement peaked in the 1950s and 1960s. African American men and women, along with whites, organized and led the movement at national and local levels. They pursued their goals through legal means, negotiations, petitions, and nonviolent protest demonstrations. The largest social movement of the 20th century, the civil rights movement influenced the modern women's rights movement and the student movement of the 1960s.

The civil rights movement centered on the American South, where the African American population was concentrated and where racial inequality in education, economic opportunity, and the political and legal processes was most blatant. Beginning in the late 19th century, state and local governments passed segregation laws, known as Jim Crow laws, and mandated restrictions on voting qualifications that left the black population economically and politically powerless. The movement therefore addressed primarily three areas of discrimination: education, social segregation, and voting rights.

### The Brown Decision

The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* ushered in a new era in the struggle for civil rights. This landmark decision outlawed racial segregation in public schools. Whites around the country condemned the decision, and in the South such white supremacist groups as the Ku Klux Klan and the Citizens' Council organized to resist desegregation, sometimes resorting to violence. A primary target of supremacist groups was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Over the course of decades the NAACP had filed a procession of court cases, including *Brown*, and had assumed the lead in the national struggle against segregated education. The oldest established national civil-rights organization, the NAACP also played an important role at the local level, where blacks across the South organized branches to combat discrimination in their communities.

Prompted in part by the work of the Arkansas NAACP and its president, Daisy Bates, one of the first attempts to comply with the *Brown* decision came in the capital city of Little Rock in 1957. When the local school board admitted nine black students to the city's previously all-white Central High School, white protests escalated into violence, forcing President Dwight D. Eisenhower to dispatch federal troops to protect the black students. A later high-profile case involved Alabama governor George Wallace, who in 1963 attempted to block black students from enrolling at the University of Alabama.

### The Challenge to Social Segregation

By the time of the Little Rock incident, the nation had already become aware of the heightened struggle in the South. In 1955 blacks in Montgomery, Ala., organized a boycott of city buses in protest of the policy of segregated seating. Lasting 381 days, the boycott, instigated by Rosa Parks, succeeded in integrating the seating. It also led

to the formation in 1957 of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), in Atlanta, Ga., as a national organization presided over by a local black minister, Martin Luther King, Jr. As SCLC head, he would later become a central leader in the larger civil rights movement.

A major incident in 1960 led to the founding of another important organization and expanded the movement's participants to include college-age blacks. In that year, four students from the all-black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College initiated sit-ins at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, N.C. Students from other southern black colleges and universities followed with similar sit-ins, bringing about the desegregation of several hundred lunch counters. During the sit-ins the young protesters organized the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Soon thereafter, many SNCC members joined forces with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Founded in Chicago in the 1940s, CORE organized the Freedom Rides of 1961. Black and white Freedom Riders boarded commercial buses in Washington, D.C., and embarked on a route through the South to test the 1960 Supreme Court decision *Boynton v. Virginia*, which had outlawed segregation in interstate transportation terminals. Although riders were beaten, arrested, and in one instance had their bus burned, the Freedom Rides were ultimately successful, prompting the Interstate Commerce Commission to enforce the ruling in *Boynton*.

The SNCC also organized local campaigns with NAACP branches to win voting rights for blacks and to end segregation in public places. One community that made the national spotlight was Albany, Ga. In 1962, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the SCLC entered the Albany struggle, which failed to gain significant results and branded King with a humiliating defeat.

The national spotlight then turned to Birmingham, Ala. Since 1956, the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights had been leading the struggle against racial discrimination there. For decades, local blacks had faced a staunch segregationist in the person of Eugene "Bull" Connor, the city's commissioner of public safety, who was chiefly responsible for Birmingham's reputation as the "most thoroughly segregated city in the United States." King arrived in the spring of 1963 and with Shuttlesworth led nonviolent demonstrations. Connor's use of police dogs and fire hoses against protesters, an act that remains infamous, helped awaken President John Kennedy's administration to the need for civil rights legislation.

Following Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson maneuvered the Civil Rights Act of 1964 through Congress. Representing a major victory for African Americans, the 1964 legislation outlawed segregation in public places and prohibited racial and gender discrimination in employment practices.

## **Voting Rights**

By the mid-1960s, however, most eligible black voters in the South remained disfranchised. Following World War II, African Americans initiated local efforts to exercise the right to vote but faced strong and sometimes violent resistance from local whites. Organized initiatives to enfranchise blacks climaxed with the Summer Project of 1964. Popularly known as Freedom Summer, the Summer Project came under the auspices of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which included the SCLC, SNCC, CORE, and the NAACP. Targeting Mississippi, where in many counties no blacks were registered to vote, COFO launched a massive and largely unsuccessful voter-registration drive. White resistance was widespread and tainted by several killings. The effort did, however, capture the attention of many lawmakers, who began calling for federal voting-rights legislation.

Such legislation followed events in Selma, Ala., where King and the SCLC went in February 1965, hoping to boost a languishing voting-rights drive that had been organized by the SNCC and local blacks. After two failed attempts, King led an 87-km (54-mile) march from Selma to Montgomery. Three activists lost their lives during the Selma

demonstrations, but in August 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

## **Black Power**

By this time, civil-rights activists were turning their attention to race discrimination in the urban North and West. Many younger activists, discontented with the slow process of change, were also becoming more militant. SNCC, for instance, in 1966 replaced its chairman, John Lewis, with the more radical Stokely Carmichael, who expanded SNCC operations beyond the South and helped popularize the concept of "black power." Advocates of black power favored African Americans controlling the movement, exercising economic autonomy, and preserving their African heritage. Most controversial were the call for racial separatism and the principle of self-defense against white violence, both of which were contrary to the ideals of more traditional activists who favored racial integration and passive resistance. A leading group within the black-power struggle was the Black Panthers. Organized in Oakland, Calif., in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, it included among its members the activist and writer Eldridge Cleaver. Probably the best-known figure within the radical wing of the civil rights movement was Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam, also known as the Black Muslims. By the early 1970s, however, black power was all but nonexistent, having never gained the support of the larger African American populace.

## **The Movement Legacy**

As late as 1969, 15 years after Brown, only 1 percent of the black students in the Deep South states were attending public schools with whites. After a series of legal cases in the late 1960s, the federal courts finally dismantled segregated schools by requiring school districts to implement plans, such as school-district rezoning, that would bring black and white school children and faculty under one roof. In 1971, the Supreme Court upheld school busing as a viable means of meeting integration goals.

By this time — after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, the rise of black militancy, and discernable gains in black employment opportunities — the civil rights movement had begun losing momentum. Observers maintain that the movement has a mixed legacy. It produced major legislation that reformed American society, and it opened up new political, social, and economic opportunities to blacks. Veterans of the movement, however, lament that it fell short of addressing the economic needs of poor Americans.

—*Jack E. Davis*